



Prospects of the Ethnographic Film

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closer to his people; I think this is the finest *group* of performances in any American film released this year.

And so the dissatisfactions one feels about *The Rain People* are not overwhelming. The chance to fail with material too complex and urgent to sort out all at once is a luxury that film-makers in Hollywood have never been able to afford. And if the fragmentation of the industry leads to more low-budget, independently made films, film-makers may have that luxury again; without it they can never hope to realize

their artistic potential. But it is too soon to make any optimistic predictions. It may be that the failure of *The Rain People* will force Coppola to go back to a more "commercial" project next time. And if a few more of these low-budget, personal films fail, the situation could change drastically once again. But for the moment anyway, these new films, with their strong, though sometimes naive commitment, and their passion to shatter irrelevant myths about America, are abrasive, and they leave us with a sense of impatience and anticipation.

DAVID MacDOUGALL

Prospects of the Ethnographic Film

In spite of the great advances in formal method in social science, much of the understanding of persisting and general relationships depends upon a grasp that is intuitive and that is independent of or not fully dependent on some formal method. In advancing social science, we invent and practice technique, and we also cultivate a humanistic art. —ROBERT REDFIELD

Ethnographic film-making occupies a curious place between the art of film and the social sciences. It has long lacked the full support of either, yet it has the capacity to achieve a truly humanistic kind of perception embracing them both. Recent interest in the ethnographic film, spurred by the accelerating disappearance of traditional cultures, may now enable it to fulfill its promise.

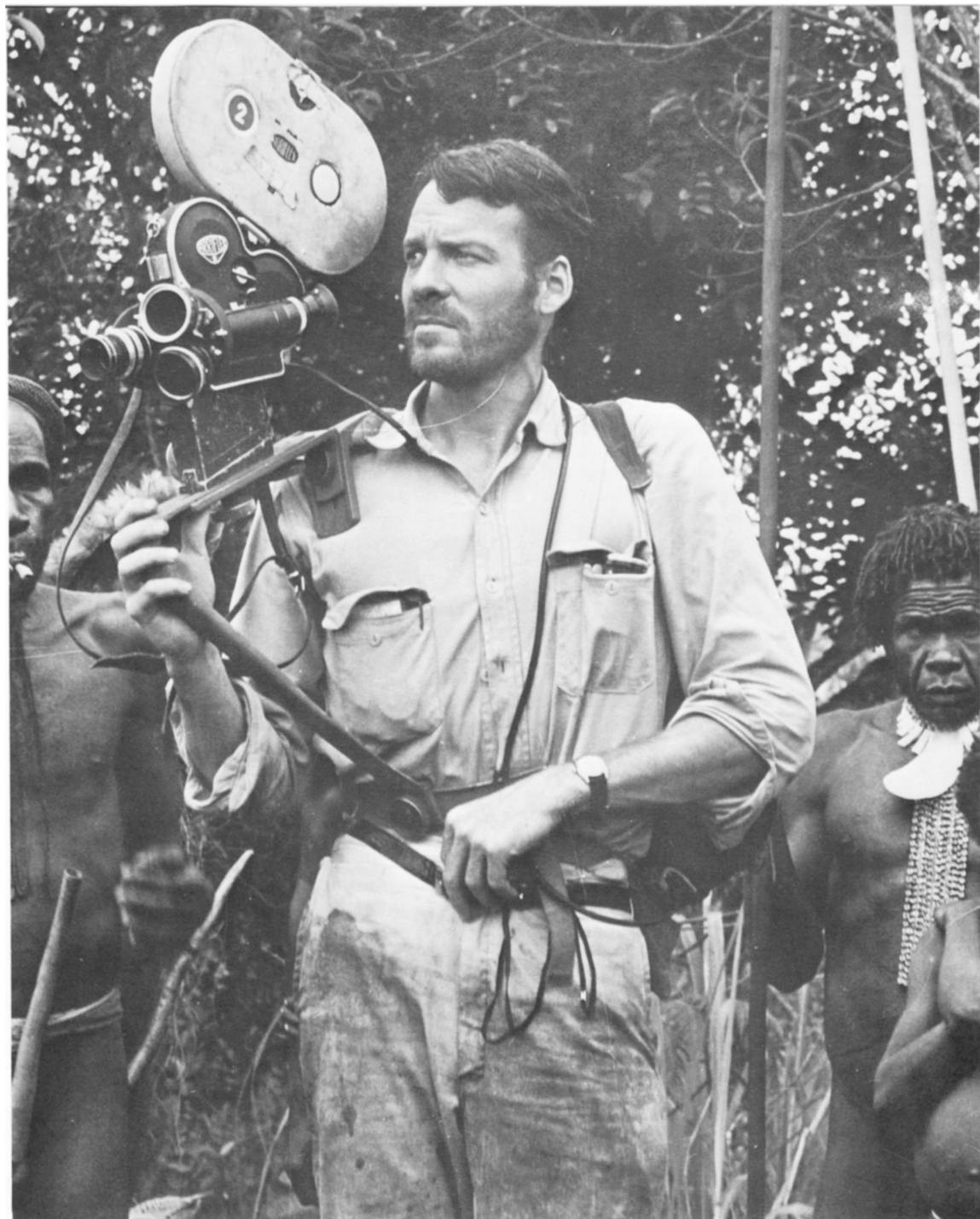
I

An ethnographic film may be regarded as any film which seeks to reveal one society to another. It may be concerned with the physical life of a people or with the nature of their social experience. Since these are also the subjects of

anthropology, we tend to associate ethnographic film-making with anthropologists, but the two are not invariably linked. One of the earliest and most important ethnographic films, Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, was the work of an explorer and geologist.

The most easily identifiable ethnographic films are those which deal with primitive societies. Two such films made by Americans are John Marshall's *The Hunters* and Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds*. Certain other films dealing with industrialized, transitional, or created societies may also be included—such as Chris Marker's *Le joli mai* or *La Mystère Koumiko*, Michel Brault's *Pour la suite du monde*, or Wiseman and Marshall's *Titicut Follies*. Ultimately, all films are in some measure ethnographic, for none can entirely evade the culture which produced it. Future historians may study *Pillow Talk* or *Easy Rider* as eagerly as those of today study Egyptian didactic tales or laundry lists in Linear B.

The intercultural aspect of the ethnographic film is nevertheless essential in regarding it as



DEAD BIRDS: *Robert Gardner during a lull in the battle.*

something distinct. The aim of interpreting one society to another is what underlies its kinship with anthropology. Without this aim, a film like Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*, so revealing of Nazi psychology and values, could properly be called an ethnographic film.

Strictly speaking, many documentary films are not ethnographic in this sense. Yet the means by which documentary film-makers examine aspects of their own societies often parallel those used in ethnographic films. If anything, ethnographic film-makers have got their methods second-hand. The approaches pioneered by Leacock and the Maysles, and by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in *Chronique d'un été*, are now at last beginning to be applied to the exploration of other cultures.

Dramatic films often verge, or seem to verge, on the ethnographic, either because of their subject matter or the circumstances of their production and viewing. The films of the Italian Neorealist movement strike many as a more honest representation of a culture than the domestic melodramas which preceded them. Part of this effect may be illusory, however—the result of the use of non-actors and of the odd tendency to find poverty more “real” than riches.

The “foreignness” of a film may also have a bearing on the ethnographic qualities which we attribute to it. To Western eyes *Pather Panchali* has the force of a cultural document, yet because it was not made by a Westerner, its ethnographic content is implicit. For Bengali audiences it would not possess the same quintessential quality as for Europeans and Americans. No doubt many American films strike foreigners in a similar manner. There may, for example, be something which the French learn about America from the films of Jerry Lewis that is less accessible (or less bearable) to Americans themselves.

Films like Susumu Hani's *Bwana Toshi* and *Bride of the Andes*, and James Ivory's *Shakespeare Wallah*, fall into a more difficult category, for they deal with encounters between members of the film-maker's own society and members of another. Like all fiction films, however, they are less likely to be taken seriously as ethno-

graphic statements than most documentaries, even though these often contain interpretations of reality which are far more suspect. Only Jean Rouch, in films like *Moi un noir* and *Jaguar* seems to have had much success in defying the automatic association of fictional techniques with falsehood, and this is probably largely due to his having introduced fiction into the documentary rather than the reverse.

A final group of films to be considered are those concerned with the exotic and sensational, or with travel and adventure. A film like *Mondo Cane* seeks sensation at the expense of understanding. *The Sky Above and the Mud Below* is only saved from being one more adventurer's self-glorification by its sometimes beautiful pictures and a certain measure of respect for its secondary human subjects. *Grass*, released in 1925, was intended in a similar vein, yet rather by chance it achieved something more valuable. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack filmed a Bakhtiari migration in Iran, yet they felt they had only succeeded in getting the background for a film. To this day, Cooper regrets that they were unable to add a semifictionalized story. As a result, *Grass* is a remarkably detailed account of an extraordinary human endeavor. Cooper and Schoedsack later made *Chang* (1927) in a Lao village in Thailand, but ethnographically it is an inferior effort, blending contrived sensations with a naive portrayal of Lao culture. *Grass*, we must conclude, was an ethnographic film in spite of itself.

Most travel films, or films of the exotic school, fail to approach other cultures with enough genuine interest to become truly ethnographic. Too often they simply indulge and reinforce the characteristic cultural responses of their makers when confronted by the unfamiliar. Flaherty's *Moana*, if we may include it in this category, is one of the very few exceptions, for it was a commercially backed film which largely subordinated the culture of its makers to that of its subjects.

II

The first uses of film for ethnographic purposes coincided with other early efforts in the history of the cinema. While the Lumière

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brothers were recording simple scenes of daily life like *La Sortie des usines* and *L'Arrivée d'un train*, F. Regnault was filming the pottery-making techniques of Berbers who had come to Paris for the Colonial Exposition of 1895. In 1901, Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer took a camera into central Australia and successfully filmed rituals and dances among the Aranda Aborigines.

This record-making use of film continues to the present day, but it amounts essentially to a scientific application of film technology rather than true film-making. This latter we must consider to be film used not only as a recording tool but also as a visual language, with a syntax allowing information to be revealed by the interrelation of shots as well as by their contents. It is this use of film language which gives anthropological films the possibility of being more than works of science and becoming works of art. It is also possible, of course, that films made for nonscientific purposes—like *Nanook* and *Grass*—will have a scientific relevance not anticipated by their makers.

The chances to test either of these possibilities have been disappointingly few. The social sciences have provided few films which can be considered more than record-footage or illustrated lectures, and documentary film-makers have provided few which are not filled with serious ethnocentric distortions. In the first case this is attributable to lack of funds and a too narrow view of film; in the second, to indifference and an ignorance of the ideas of anthropology.

Nanook of the North was probably the first true ethnographic film, for it was both a film and inherently ethnographic. Although Flaherty was not an anthropologist, the procedure which he followed still commends itself to anyone attempting to make anthropological films. He knew his subjects intimately, knew their language and customs, spent several years filming among them, and sought out their reactions to their own representation on film. Not only was Flaherty the first to see in film the means for a new kind of exploration and documentation of reality, but he pursued his insight with a thoroughness which would be rare even today.



NANOOK

GRASS



As a film *Nanook* has lost none of its immediacy after fifty years, and despite certain fabrications which ethnographic film-makers would now probably avoid, it remains one of the most valid and effective summations of another culture yet attempted on film.*

Nanook also reveals Flaherty's personal concerns, though to a lesser extent than his later

*A shortened, speeded-up version with a puerile sound track is unfortunately in widespread distribution; it is a serious distortion of Flaherty's work.

films. Yet in 1920, film-makers, unlike anthropologists, were under no professional obligation to keep their attitudes at a distance. If anything, their tendency was to the contrary. It is therefore noteworthy that Flaherty restrained himself as much as he did, for it attests to his fundamental commitment to revealing the essential reality of what he found. The case of *Nanook*

also suggests the extent to which an artist may parallel the disciplines of the social sciences if he is motivated by similar ends.

Nanook was released in 1922. Cooper and Schoedsack filmed *Grass* in 1924. There follows a long period during which valuable record footage was collected by Stocker and Tindale in Australia (1932 and 1935) and by Bateson and

FILM AND ANTHROPOLOGY: A NOTE

Film-makers are very worried about their virginity—they always have been, whether it was threatened by exploitive producers (studios, distributors) or sponsors (government agencies, advertisers, special-interest groups). When asked to collaborate with scientists or "subject experts" they act as if they'd been asked to join the Vichy government. Thus a common reaction to such a special field as ethnographic film has been to assume that it is something on which failed anthropologists and failed film-makers collaborate to conceal each other's weaknesses. This leads to devious explanations that Jean Rouch is not really a film-maker and Robert Flaherty was not really an anthropologist, with any interest their work has for film or anthropology being merely coincidental to their own mad genius.

It is fair to say that Rouch and John Marshall probably *are* geniuses and their achievements cannot be imitated.

However, there is a great pressure to try. A colloquium at UCLA in the spring of 1968 turned up practically all the great names in ethnographic film, and established quite clearly that a new kind of collaboration between film-maker and ethnographer was developing, in the wake of pioneers such as Rouch and Marshall. Now there is a new breed, of which the author of the accompanying article is a

leading example. Trained in the UCLA film school, and then in UCLA's ethnographic film program, he has worked in the United States and in Africa, and has become one of the field's best cameramen, with an extraordinary eye for people and their interrelationships.

When Pat Jaffe was editing Leacock's *Petey and Johnny*, she reported the frustration she felt at not coming up with a structural order for the footage that would result in a coherent movie without denigrating the subjects. This is a major aesthetic problem still being faced in ethnographic film; MacDougall reports that Marshall would no longer want to give a film the shape of *The Hunters*, since that bears so little relation to the shape of the people's lives. Thus the film which the MacDougalls and Richard Hawkins have shot in Uganda among the Gesu will have to respect the intimacy which was recorded on film *and* avoid the temptations of melodramatic structure obvious in the preparation of two young men for circumcision rites.

It is clear that we are still at a very preliminary stage in the art of collaboration. If the realist cinema is to advance it will have to depend either on the happy accident of rare talents (Fred Wiseman?) or hope that people can be trained with the right eye and ear for what is happening, and the minds to make sense of it.

—COLIN YOUNG

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Mead in Bali (1936-37) but during which few notable ethnographic films were made. Then in the late forties Jean Rouch began making films in West Africa. The Marshall family began to collect footage which would later result in *The Hunters* (1958) and other films. Robert Gardner, who edited *The Hunters* with John Marshall, shot *Dead Birds* in 1961.

Marshall's film, *The Hunters*, tells the story of a hunt for food by a small band of !Kung Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert. It was skillfully compiled from material concerning a number of different hunts in over 250,000 feet of record footage. (The total body of Bushman footage is now over half a million feet.) The film is therefore not a strict record of an actual event, but an attempt to reveal one aspect of Bushman life, and through it an understanding of the Bushman world view. It is a case of synthesis put to the service of a truth which no single event by itself might adequately express. Through its emphasis upon the pursuit of a wounded giraffe, the film makes us share something of the attitudes of a people whose marginal existence depends upon the killing of game. No single "slice of life" could communicate quite the same sense of the Bushman's world of scrub, thorn, and pan, nor his experience of living always on the edge of privation. *The Hunters* is a rare and special film, reflecting the kind of understanding of a culture which permits a meaningful interpretive rendering. It is one of the few true ethnographic films that we have, and it is also a pioneer work in the field.

Rouch's work began with documentary records (*Chasse à l'hippopotame au harpon, Danses de possession, Circoncision chez les Songhai*) but developed into a comprehensive exploration of the uses of film in revealing other cultures. Films like *Moi un noir*, *Les Maîtres-fous*, and *Jaguar* combine documentary elements with elements of fiction and psychodrama to penetrate the aspirations and frustrations of individuals in a changing society.

Rouch's approach has sometimes paralleled Marshall's, as in *Chasse au lion*, but it has generally been characterized by a different spirit and by a willingness to invite the participation of



THE HUNTERS

his subjects in the interpretive process. His objective in doing this is two-fold. It does, of course, permit the self-expression of people as they know and understand themselves, but on another level it reveals them to us as they would like to be, and it enables us to approach aspects of their culture of which they are unconscious. We sometimes see, too, a process taking place in which the characters come to view themselves and their culture with new eyes. Over the past few years, Rouch has become concerned about the dangers of certain kinds of participation in film-making (one of the "gangsters" of *Moi un noir* ended up in jail; students in *La Pyramide humaine* failed their examinations), and temporarily at least he has given up psychodrama.

As a whole, Rouch's film-making is impressive for its resourcefulness in finding new modes of expression. Many of his films were made under difficult conditions, and with inadequate equipment and financing. Rouch seems to have stepped over these obstacles almost effortlessly, and one often feels that they have brought out the best in him. His films may be technically flawed, but they proceed with such insight and energy that this scarcely matters, and the technical crudity itself sometimes adds a certain note of brute veracity not unlike that noted by André Bazin in Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon Tiki* film.

Rouch's resourcefulness is readily apparent in *Jaguar*, one of his best films. Made over a ten-year period, and at odd moments on odd scraps

of film, it concerns itself with the subject of migration from the rural areas to the cities of West Africa. It is the story of a group of young men who leave their life of cattle herding in the arid savannaland bordering the Sahara and begin a journey of thousands of miles, taking them to the coast of Ghana (then the Gold Coast) and back again.

Rouch used non-actors who improvised their parts. He did not have synchronous sound but managed to achieve an extraordinary, multi-leveled sound track by having his characters improvise a running commentary while watching themselves on film. It is a fascinating mixture of dialogue, comments on the action, exclamations, reminiscences, laughter, and jokes at one another's expense. It tells us far more about the men and their half-played, half-lived experience than would have been possible by almost any other means. As he has done many times, Rouch has turned a potential limitation to his advantage, and *Jaguar* is a brilliant example of the role which creative interpretation can play in ethnographic film-making.

Jaguar and other films by Rouch have been criticized for mixing fact and fiction, and for presenting Rouch's feelings about Africa rather than Africa itself. There is no doubt some truth in this, as there is in Flaherty's case, yet it is also true that Rouch has done more than any other ethnographic film-maker to try new methods and infuse his films with the spirit of their subjects. *Jaguar* was not made about a homogeneous society but about a condition and state of mind that existed in West Africa in the fifties—a time when it was possible to travel freely and when there was an exhilarating sense of opportunity in the air. Today Rouch considers that period closed. *Jaguar* is one of its few surviving expressions.

The controversy over Rouch's approach underscores the scarcity of films which can be considered even remotely ethnographic. If more films were being made, no one would begrudge him his unique kind of experimentation. It is perhaps a measure of the poverty of the field that any film which deviates from the most con-

ventional modes of inquiry is accused of betraying anthropological principles.

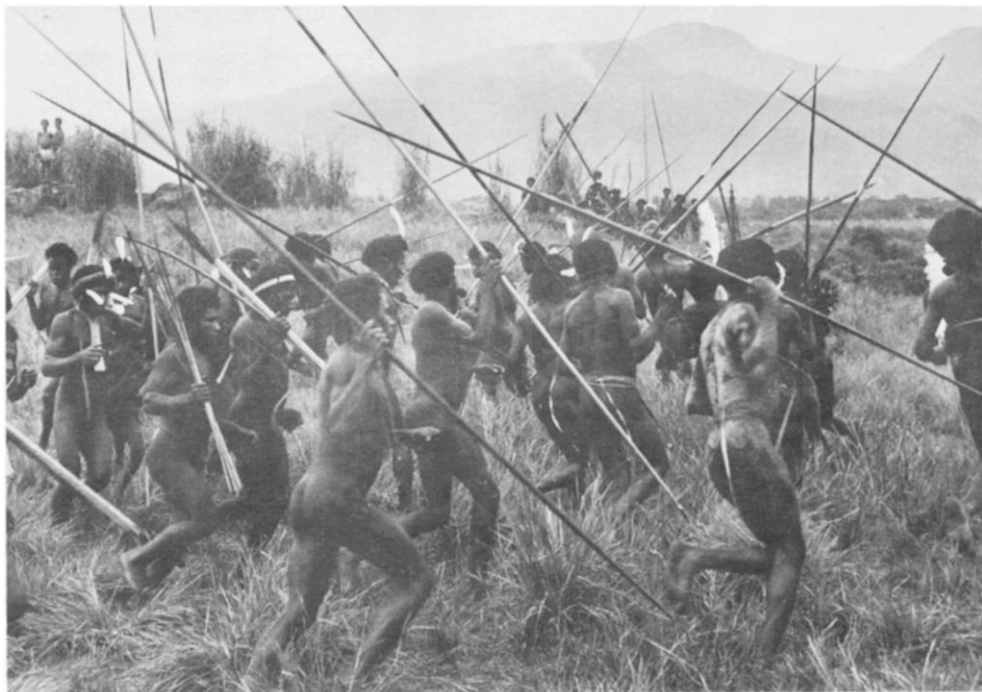
Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds* was but one result of a joint expedition of social scientists, naturalists, and photographers to study the relatively untouched culture of the Dani, a people of the Baliem Valley in the Central Highlands of New Guinea. The expedition also produced two anthropological monographs, Peter Matthiessen's intimate portrait of the Dani, *Under the Mountain Wall*, a book of still photographs called *Gardens of War*, and several shorter films by Karl Heider.

Dead Birds attempts to view the culture from the perspective of ritual warfare, the dominant preoccupation of the people, which Gardner feels colors every other aspect of their lives. Gardner says he chose to go among the Dani because of his interest in ritual warfare, and he claims that the film is a personal response to what he found. Such a position tends to disarm criticism, but the film is clearly meant as a more

DEAD BIRDS: (Distributor: Image Resources,
12 Arrow Street, Cambridge, Mass. 02138)



DEAD
BIRDS
*The
battle.*



definitive statement than this would imply. It is an attempt to find within a culture a central core of meaning which defines its entire outlook. Among the Dani, Gardner finds this expressed in a fable of mortality and immortality where men share the fate of birds, which in their inability to shed their skins like snakes are denied eternal life. As in the myth of the fall of man, freedom is intimately associated with vulnerability. Man must pay for his brief glory with his life.

The film conveys this sense of the Dani world in a convincing and often brilliant fashion, yet one sometimes wonders afterwards whether the fatalism and independence expressed by the fable is in fact an adequate explanation for everything one sees. There remain many mysteries about the warfare, and Dani attitudes toward it, which the film does not reveal. One is left with the impression that the interpretation is too simple, or excludes too much, and that in spite of itself there is a touch of condescension in the film.

Whatever its omissions, *Dead Birds* remains a remarkable achievement, for it goes far beyond the surface quality of record-footage and

shows a specific time and place inhabited by individuals rather than mere components of a social mechanism. Like *The Hunters*, from which it is descended, it exposes us to the motivations of another society with sufficient force to enable us, briefly, to share some of its values. Unlike *The Hunters*, however, it was planned this way from the start. It is one of the few attempts since Flaherty to place faith in the film as a total means of exploring the nature of another society. It is true, however, that Gardner's colleagues were conducting other kinds of studies, and perhaps this is an ideal arrangement, freeing film for what it can do best.

Recently, Asen Balikci, an anthropologist at the University of Montreal, and Quentin Brown, of the Education Development Center, have produced an important if costly body of filmed materials on the Netsilik Eskimos. It represents a mixed approach, some of it tending toward responsive film-making (especially in the camera work of Robert Young), the rest more in the nature of film records. This project is significant for the beauty and sensitivity of its documentation, its success in achieving an historical reconstruction, and the fact that the fin-



Netsilik Eskimos. (Distributor: Educational Development Center, 15 Mifflin Place, Cambridge, Mass. 02138)

ished films are intended to be used in elementary school teaching.

In the past few years a number of anthropologists and film-makers have become increasingly involved with ethnographic film. Among these are Timothy Asch among the Yanomamö of Venezuela, Ian Dunlop and Roger Sandall among the Australian Aborigines; James Marshall in the Amazon; Mark McCarty in Ireland; Jorge Preloran in Argentina and Venezuela; Richard Hawkins in Chile and among the Gisu of Uganda; David Peri and John Collier among American Indians; and the writer among the Jie of Uganda.

John Marshall has recently declared that he would not wish to make another film like *The Hunters*. Today its approach strikes him as over-ambitious and dominated by Western structural conventions. In editing other films from the !Kung Bushman footage he has turned his attention to finding new methods of organization, both for individual films and for groups of short films designed to be seen serially.

Other ethnographic film-makers have shown a similar interest in film form, and therefore ultimately in film content, indicating their desire to break free of ethnocentric formulas and allow their films to reflect more accurately the structures of the societies which they portray. In *The Village*, for example, Mark McCarty refuses to approach Irish society through the lattice-work of conventional expectations. This may prove unsettling to those who recognize in it something substantial but find themselves unable to

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reduce it to the usual categories. The film's success lies in answering, or at least illuminating, some of the new questions it raises.

Film-makers are also conscious of the need to provide a context for films which show events that would otherwise remain inexplicable. Timothy Asch has chosen to cover the same material twice in *The Feast*, his excellent film on the Yanomamö. The film begins with a shortened summary which clarifies what follows, a pattern also used in some of Marshall's recent !Kung films.

The question of structure in ethnographic films will probably become increasingly important to anthropologists and film-makers. It is more and more apparent that ethnographic footages does not always contain what we think it contains, nor does it reveal information to us in the same conceptual patterns that have traditionally organized anthropological thought and writing. Indeed, film could alter the study of primitive societies in much the same way that modern linguistics has altered the study of languages, by revealing the inadequacy of the conventional grammar which has long controlled our habits of perception.

Developments in this direction may soon make films like *Dead Birds* and *The Hunters* seem false and old-fashioned. The ethnographic film, so long a step-child of the cinema, may well develop innovations in form which will also help free dramatic and documentary films from structures to which they have long been bound.

III

It is clear that the social scientist who contemplates using film should consider carefully its full range of possibilities. He will then be better prepared to decide whether or not to adopt it in its totality—that is, as a kind of language. If so, he becomes, for better or worse, a film-maker, working not only with images but also with the structures which relate one image to another and which allow them to reveal in concert what they could not in isolation. If he rejects a structural use for film, he effectively rejects everything but its technology.

There are uses in research for limited applications of film, but they are analogous to using

only the lexical aspect of written language—as if one were to employ words but not sentences in anthropological writing. Like writing, film becomes singularly crude and inarticulate without its syntax, and is reduced to a kind of note-taking. Films exist which amount to sets of visual notes, like Carroll Williams's *Ixil Setting Film*, but they are no more representative of the full possibilities of ethnographic film-making than note-taking is representative of the full extent of written anthropology.

Misunderstandings of these possibilities often strain relations between film-makers and anthropologists. A common oversimplification is the division of all film work into record-making, on the one hand, and "aesthetic" or "artistic" film on the other. Structural uses of film become too easily branded as scientifically suspect, the implication being that all but the simplest recording uses belong to the province of art; and on the rather dubious assumption that art is concerned with form rather than content, these uses are held to be antagonistic to anthropological objectives. "Aesthetic" and "artistic" become perjorative terms applied to any efforts which are not the most rudimentary kinds of recording, even when these are patently inartistic. Ethnographic films are thus lumped together with "art films" and the crudest travelogues. That film can be used for analytical purposes of a more complex sort is not enteretained, nor is the possibility that an anthropologist might conceivably choose to use film expression rather than writing for all of his work.

The serious ethnographic film-maker is hampered by this characterization, for he does not set out to make "art," but rather to apply film at its most sensitive to the examination of other societies. He does not use film language for its own sake, but for what it can reveal of external reality. In effect, he lets art take care of itself. It is therefore not the relationship of art and anthropology which is at issue, for art is a by-product rather than a goal of this kind of film-making. What is at issue is the acceptance of film as a medium capable of intellectual articulation.

For anyone attempting to assess the promise

of film for anthropology, an understanding of its limitations is probably more beneficial than a feeling for its more obvious resources. All too often, unbounded enthusiasm for one aspect of a new discovery obscures elements which ultimately prove more valuable. There is a tendency among those who have never worked with film, and among some who have, to regard it as a kind of magic, capable by itself of capturing the most precise and informative images. Among anthropologists this view often takes the form of rejecting any role for the film-maker beyond that of turning the camera on and off. The camera becomes an object of veneration and is thought capable of a kind of omniscience in viewing other societies. The film-maker becomes a potential threat to the culturally unbiased vision of the camera, likely to impose distortions on the film-making process.

This point of view is based upon a fallacy, yet fortunately it is a fallacy of faith rather than indifference. Its only danger is that once revealed (like a magician's sleight-of-hand) it may lead to such disenchantment that any role for film is rejected.

Belief in the omniscience of film as a research tool arises first from experiencing its effects without understanding how they are produced, and second, from overgeneralizing from the particular film experience. Film-viewers in Louis Lumière's day were entranced at the sight of leaves shimmering on trees. It seemed incredible that the precise motions of each leaf had been captured, and audiences responded by investing the camera with superhuman attributes.

Today the ability of a camera to record the shimmering of leaves is still awe-inspiring, and the assumption is easily made that if it can do this, an extra-human cinema is possible. Under the stimulus of such accurate representation, the viewer conjures up its accompanying context of sensations—the smell of earth and foliage, the feeling of sunshine and breeze, even the sounds of birds. It is not surprising that the would-be ethnographic film-maker or anthropologist, eager for a way of capturing experience which avoids the terrible difficulty of words, seizes upon the cinema as a technological wonder. The

precise images of men moving in their environment may be sufficient to convince him that it is but a small step to filming everything about them.

Anyone who has handled a motion picture camera, however, knows how difficult it is to use, even for simple recording purposes, and how often there is a disparity between the images on the film and the reality. Certain magical qualities remain, but it becomes clear that to capture any sense of the totality of an event, far more than technical competence is required. The camera is disappointingly tunnel-visioned, and the subjects of its images are devoid of the meanings which they achieve naturally in a larger context.

To document a scene in any depth, the selectivity of the camera cannot be left to chance, nor can it be excessively broadened. The ethnographic film-maker must choose his images with as much care as an ethnographer with a notebook chooses words. This is true for all the tasks which he may set himself. The difficulty is perhaps greatest when he attempts to convey aspects of culture which are not visible but which have visual signs or correlatives. Beyond a certain point, this may even be foolhardy. Anyone attempting to put on film a complex kinship system might be better advised to take up pencil and paper.

It is possible, however, to examine with film the nonvisual aspects of a culture—its attitudes, values, and beliefs. Yet the film-maker should not assume that he can proceed as an anthropological writer might, for film has a different kind of sensitivity and yields its information in a different form. It is not essentially a symbolic system, but a system of concrete representations. The film-maker must proceed on the hints of thought and feeling that come from direct observation of human behavior. His analysis will not be a series of abstractions, but a kind of exploration. It will be intimate and specific, and it will have the force of immediate experience. If it generalizes for an entire society, the process will not depend upon summary statements but upon the connotations of single witnessed events, or the accumulated evidence of related events.

If this kind of inquiry is difficult and requires both skill and knowledge, it does not necessarily follow that the recording of simple visual data is much easier. One may think that to show how a basket is woven or a tool is made it is enough to set the camera on a tripod and turn it on. This either reflects a belief in the magical fallacy or a tolerance for records of poor quality. If the camera is far enough away to show the craftsman and his surroundings, it will be too far away to show his most delicate manipulations. If it remains close enough to record these, much



Still from an unfinished film by David MacDougall on the Jie, a seminomadic, pastoral people of northeastern Uganda.

may occur outside the picture area. If it faces him, part of his work or equipment may be hidden behind him. If it is low, it will not see the top of his work; if it is high, it will miss the underside. If the social context of the work is important, even more complex considerations arise.

Clearly, even the recording of a technological process requires more than the presence of the camera itself. Such scenes are easily filmed badly, but they may also be filmed so that we see in great detail what is occurring. The difference lies in the degree to which the camera is responsive to what is taking place before it. Some zealous investigators erroneously assume that to use different camera angles and focal length lenses in such a case is merely to obscure the "objective" recording of an event with artistic pretensions. No doubt their suspicions can be justified by many bad films, yet this should not blind them to the resources of film-making. Used to serve the subject, they increase the chances for objective observation.

Eisenstein used to set his film students the problem of how to shoot a specific scene if one were confined to a single fixed camera position. The inevitable question that arose was what was most important to show in the scene, and what would have to be sacrificed. Such problems are good training for a film-maker. They make him more conscious of the means at his disposal and more careful in their use. But to impose such restrictions upon film-making in the name of greater objectivity is analogous to saying that one can see better with one eye than with two.

All this is perhaps self-evident to those who regularly use film as language, or who understand it as such. But in the social sciences, words (and in some cases diagrams and numbers) are the primary means of dealing with information. Film therefore remains for many a perplexing and unmanageable intrusion. Record-footage, minimally articulated, has managed to find a place as a partial substitute for first-hand observation, but today, when film offers a means of exploring societies in much greater depth, it would be unfortunate if it were turned entirely in this direction.

This is not an idle possibility. The present tendency of the social sciences in the direction of cross-cultural and structural analysis requires specialized and suitably unambiguous data. Film can provide some of this, and it has already proven useful in fields ranging from child development and primate sociology to kinesics and sociolinguistics. But it is to be hoped that a natural tendency to balance such an emphasis with other approaches to human societies will soon find in film-making an appropriate and indispensable method.

Much about the quality of life in traditional societies escapes the sifting and sorting processes of social science, and in any case is irrelevant to its present goals. As these societies vanish, and as the peoples of the world come more and more to resemble one another, the variety that once characterized the social life of man may be fully grasped only in the works of skillful writers and film-makers. There is an aesthetic value in the diversity of cultures; and to the humanist there is a wisdom to be derived from viewing one's own way of life and values in the light of others.

Anthropology is, of course, a response to these perceptions. The value of film is that it can help them to be more complete: by adding the sensory experience to analytical data and by exploring various levels of human experience with a simultaneity which is impossible in written studies. In a single shot or scene, for example, it may be possible to convey not only the physical details of a ritual ceremony, but also its psychological meaning for those involved, and perhaps even its symbolic significance.

Preserving the imprint of diverse cultures therefore becomes an important and urgent goal, for which all the accompanying dangers of individual interpretation must be risked. Films do not achieve complex perceptions easily. This therefore presents the ethnographic film-maker with his greatest obligation: to increase through his skill the number of meanings conveyed in his material. While filming, and later in the editing process, he must be prepared to observe and reveal the texture of human life on a variety

of levels: the appearance of a people and their surroundings; their technology and physical way of life; their ritual activities, and what beliefs these signify; the quality of their interpersonal communication, and what it tells of their relationships; the psychology and personalities of individuals in the society; the relation of people to their environment—their knowledge of it, use of it, and movement within it; the means by which the culture is passed on from one generation to another; the rhythms of the society, and its sense of geography and time; the values of the people; their political and social organization; their contacts with other cultures; and the overall quality of their world view.

The difficulty and expense of film-making are great (though the expense can perhaps be less than is generally supposed), but neither expense nor difficulty should be permitted to create a paralyzing inertia in the field at a time when the need for its flowering is so great. If few good ethnographic films have yet been made, it is not because they are impossible to make, but because ethnographic film-making has undergone a protracted infancy. It is now time that it matured. As film becomes increasingly familiar in our lives, some of its magical attributes fall away. It becomes more approachable and as a consequence more likely to be tried, mastered, and ultimately applied to the most difficult tasks of all.

IV

The work of Rouch, Marshall, and Gardner reveals that skillful use of the film idiom can achieve a sense of the wholeness of other cultures. The need for this is also apparent to anthropologists who do not make films, for at times some turn to a kind of writing which differs from their usual approach. This is why we have Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People* as well as his *Wayward Servants*, and Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* as well as *Structural Anthropology*. Other books of similar intent are Oscar Lewis's *Children of Sanchez* and *La Vida* and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's *The Harmless People*.

The film-maker's task is no easier than the writer's, but at least he has the advantage of

speaking directly to the senses of his audience, without the coding and decoding inevitable with written language. His problems lie elsewhere: not in finding stimuli to evoke a given reality, but in choosing from a profusion of stimuli those which most meaningfully represent the totality of an experience.

The makers of record-footage often seek the opposite of this: to isolate single aspects of culture so that they may be studied more clearly and also cross-culturally. This is the reason for the "thematic unit" approach of the *Encyclopaedia Cinematographica* at Göttingen. It also characterizes the reconstructive films of Sam Barrett, such as *Pine Nuts*, in which we see men and women going through their motions of food-gathering like automatons. Such documentation is valuable, though one may wonder whether it always requires the exclusion of the surrounding social context. The precision of observation achieved in some of the Netsilik Eskimo films would suggest that it does not.

A more problematical kind of record-footage is that which attempts to apply methods derived from statistics to visual information. The taking of random and therefore presumably "representative" views of culture with the camera has been suggested by some investigators, but false conclusions may be drawn from such material unless so much has been shot as to constitute a statistically large sampling. Valuable information may be discovered lying latent in film—as Sorenson and Gajdusek have ably demonstrated in their studies of child development and disease—but there may be some doubt whether filming conducted by individuals completely unfamiliar with a society, and therefore without anthropological preconceptions, produces enough rewards to justify its great expense. Unconscious preconceptions are inevitable, and they can be as limiting as conscious ones and harder to eliminate.

It is also erroneous to assume that in a "slice of life" one has captured an accurate image of an event taking place before the camera. The most significant aspect of it may be hidden or exist on a non-visual level. Members of a society may, for example, appear to take for granted

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things which are highly important to them. If the film-maker captures only the outward emphasis placed upon these things, he may deduce a false impression of their real significance. This is avoided if he is prepared to look beneath the surface of events and be guided in his filming by the structures which he finds there.

The recent introduction of portable synchronous sound equipment has been of immeasurable importance in expanding the possibilities open to ethnographic film-makers, even though surprisingly few have taken advantage of them. It has made accessible the entire range of human experience involving speech. This includes not only the subjects of conversation, which can be one of the richest sources of information about a people, but also the social behavior which surrounds conversation and the nature of the interpersonal relationships which it reveals.

Scenes filmed with synchronous sound take on a new immediacy and psychological depth, yet this should not tempt us into believing that it is now easier to make meaningful films than it used to be. If anything, it calls for even greater discipline, for one must now be attuned to the meaning of a much subtler range of behavior taking place before the camera. Synchronous sound, like any other means of documentation, remains a mere technical capability until made to serve a larger conceptual approach. There is a danger that synchronous sound may give new force to the magical fallacy in ethnographic film-making, and in documentary films we have already witnessed this in the misapplications of *cinéma-vérité* techniques.

V

Any anthropologist with fieldwork behind him knows that what gives to a culture its uniqueness and dignity can never be encompassed in a description of its values, social organization, and economy. Instead, it lies in the awareness of individuals waking each day into a world embracing certain possibilities and no others. These constitute the conceptual and physical horizons of the communal experience and give it its meaning and special character. By approximating the cumulative effect of extended experience, a good film or book can create an awareness which



A Netsilik Eskimo child playing.

illuminates other kinds of knowledge.

In the best ethnographic films there is an attempt to involve the viewer's senses and feelings as well as his mind. Flaherty always makes us aware of physical environment as an influence upon cultural attitudes. In *The Hunters* Marshall stresses the constant disappointments which accompany the search for game, perhaps throwing some light on the patience and solidarity in Bushman social relationships. Such films do not attempt to duplicate the information available in a written anthropological study. Instead, they expose the viewer to the setting and practice of life of a people.

In some of the Australian record-footage shot by Stocker and Tindale in the 1930's there is a suggestion of what film can do, even inadvertently, to put an audience into a life experience different from its own. While the implied purpose of the various scenes is to show specific activities of a band of Aborigines, other unemphasized aspects of their life recur sufficiently often to provide a significant thematic substructure. An example of this is the role of dogs. They are never singled out for attention, yet they are always present; and one gradually begins to realize that these people do not "have" dogs, but that dogs live among them. When men sit around a fire, dogs are between them, sharing the warmth. When they sleep, the dogs are there sleeping among them. It is perhaps a small

point, and there is no doubt much more to be learned about dogs in this society, yet it seems important in understanding the quality of life in a small nomadic band.

Among the Netsilik Eskimo films of Asen Balikci there is a scene in which a small child snares a seagull, slowly and inexpertly stones it to death, and then brings it triumphantly to his mother, who cuts off the feet for him to play with. For a long time he makes the feet run over the ground, holding one in each hand. The cameraman has the good sense to follow this sequence of events, and in its totality it reveals something of another way of life with extraordinary conciseness. It tells more than about the socialization of children, or their attitudes toward life or suffering, or their relationships with their mothers. By some intuitive means it better prepares us to understand other aspects of the culture—its mobility, its ecology, its beliefs.

One could mention other isolated details of this kind, but what seems important is the unexpected manner in which a film can suddenly penetrate the emotional life of a people. The film-maker runs risks when he pursues such insights, for he must guard against endowing aspects of another culture with a false significance. Yet at the same time he stands between his own society and another, and as the mediator between the two he must find ways of extending his understanding to those who have only his film as a source. His choice of material must be partly influenced by his judgement of how it is likely to be received. He can thus never be totally independent of his own culture, never a total cultural relativist.

The ethnographic film-maker has the means today to select from many levels of social behavior and combine them to produce a human document which is valuable both anthropologically and aesthetically. What he may concern himself with is partly the subject of conventional ethnology; but much else reflects the interests of documentary film-makers in any society: the desire to achieve an immediacy of time, place, and human experience.

Like anthropologists, ethnographic film makers must beware of a certain arrogance

which amounts to a more intellectualized form of the "white man's burden." Film is a product of industrial civilization, but this does not mean that it cannot be employed effectively by people in transitional societies. One sometimes feels that Jean Rouch has tried to make the kinds of films about West Africa that West Africans might have made had they had the means. Some, like Senegal's Ousmane Sembène, have now found the means and are skillful film-makers.

The training of film-makers in developing countries should perhaps be undertaken as a concomitant of ethnographic film-making, a program which could be made practical if regional ethnographic film centers are ever established. The objective would not be "naive" film-making of the kind fostered in John Adair's and Sol Worth's experiment among the Navajo, but rather the creation of experienced and committed film makers. This is important because it is difficult enough to make film say anything, much less reveal the subtleties of one's own culture. Home movies tend to look similar in all societies. The most "Navajo" film to come out of Adair's and Worth's project was in fact made by the least naive film-maker, whose training and experience had prepared him to master the camera more quickly than the others.

It is not necessarily true that an indigenous film-maker will understand all aspects of his society better than an outsider. Indeed, there are many reasons why he may not. But the value of non-Western schools of film-making, such as the Japanese and Indian, should convince us of the poverty of a one-sided approach to any culture. Films made by non-Westerners about their own societies may be less anthropologically oriented than those made by ethnographic film-makers, but this does not mean they will be less relevant anthropologically.

In encouraging film-making in other societies we may also be the beneficiaries in a way which we may not at first anticipate. In the long run it is probable that some of these film-makers, having made films in their own countries, will reverse the ethnographic process and turn their cameras upon us.